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THE THIRD ANNUAL PHILOSOPHICAL LECTURE

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PHILOSOPHICAL OPINION IN AMERICA

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Delivered January 30, 1918

THE honour of addressing the British Academy is not one to be declined ; and in considering on what subject a not very learned person might venture to do so, it has occurred to me that I might profit by my long association with academic philosophers in America to put before you some observations on a question which is curious in itself and may become important in the future ; namely, how has migration to the new world affected philosophical ideas ?

At first sight we might be tempted, perhaps, to dismiss this question altogether, on the ground that no such effect is discernible. For what do we find in America in the guise of philosophy ? In the background the same Protestant theology as in Europe and the same Catholic theology ; on the surface, the same adoption of German idealism, the same vogue of evolution, the same psychology becoming metaphysics, and lately the same revival of a mathematical or logical realism. In no case has the first expression of these various tendencies appeared in America, and no original system that I know of has arisen there. It would seem, then, that in philosophy, as in letters generally, polite America has continued the common tradition of Christendom, in paths closely parallel to those followed in England ; and that modern speculation, which is so very sensitive to changed times, is quite indifferent to distinctions of place.

Perhaps ; but I say advisedly *polite* America, for without this qualification what I have been suggesting would hardly be true. Polite America carried over its household gods from Puritan England in a spirit of consecration, and it has always wished to remain in communion with whatever its conscience might value in the rest of the world. Yet it has been cut off by distance and by revolutionary prejudice against things ancient or foreign ; and it has been disconcerted at the same time by the insensible shifting of the ground under its feet :

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it has suffered from in-breeding and anaemia. On the other hand, a crude but vital America has sprung up from the soil, undermining, feeding, and transforming the America of tradition.

This young America was originally composed of all the prodigals, truants, and adventurous spirits that the colonial families produced: it was fed continually by the younger generation, born in a spacious, half-empty world, tending to forget the old straitened morality and to replace it by another, quite jovially human. This truly native America was reinforced by the miscellany of Europe arriving later, not in the hope of founding a godly commonwealth, but only of prospering in an untrammelled one. The horde of immigrants eagerly accepts the external arrangements and social spirit of American life, but never hears of its original austere principles, or relegates them to the same willing oblivion as it does the constraints which it has just escaped—Jewish, Irish, German, Italian, or whatever they may be. We should be seriously deceived if we overlooked for a moment the curious and complex relation between these two Americas.

Let me give you one illustration. Professor Norton, the friend of Carlyle, of Ruskin, and of Matthew Arnold, and, for the matter of that, the friend of everybody, a most urbane, learned, and exquisite spirit, was descended from the most typical of New England divines: yet he was loudly accused, in public and in private, of being un-American. On the other hand, a Frenchman of ripe judgement, who knew him perfectly, once said to me: 'Norton wouldn't like to hear it, but he is a terrible Yankee.' Both judgements were well grounded. Professor Norton's mind was deeply moralized, discriminating, and sad; and these qualities rightly seemed American to the French observer of New England, but they rightly seemed un-American to the politician from Washington.

Philosophical opinion in America is of course rooted in the genteel tradition. It is either inspired by religious faith, and designed to defend it, or else it is created somewhat artificially in the larger universities, by deliberately proposing problems which, without being very pressing to most Americans, are supposed to be necessary problems of thought. Yet if you expected academic philosophers in America, because the background of their minds seems perfunctory, to resemble academic philosophers elsewhere, you would be often mistaken. There is no prig's paradise in those regions. Many of the younger professors of philosophy are no longer the sort of persons that might as well have been clergymen or schoolmasters: they have rather the type of mind of a doctor, an engineer, or a social reformer; the wide-awake young man who can do most things better than old people,

and who knows it. He is less eloquent and apostolic than the older generation of philosophers, very professional in tone and conscious of his *Fach*; not that he would deny for a moment the many-sided ignorance to which nowadays we are all reduced, but that he thinks he can get on very well without the things he ignores. His education has been more pretentious than thorough; his style is deplorable; social pressure and his own great eagerness have condemned him to over-work, committee meetings, early marriage, premature authorship, and lecturing two or three times a day under forced draught. He has no peace in himself, no window open to a calm horizon, and in his heart perhaps little taste for mere scholarship or pure speculation. Yet like the plain soldier staggering under his clumsy equipment, he is cheerful; he keeps his faith in himself and in his allotted work, puts up with being toasted only on one side, remains open-minded, whole-hearted, appreciative, helpful, confident of the future of goodness and of science. In a word, he is a cell in that teeming democratic body; he draws from its warm, contagious activities the sanctions of his own life and, less consciously, the spirit of his philosophy.

It is evident that such minds will have but a loose hold on tradition, even on the genteel tradition in American philosophy. Not that in general they oppose or dislike it; their alienation from it is more radical; they forget it. Religion was the backbone of that tradition, and towards religion, in so far as it is a private sentiment or presumption, they feel a tender respect; but in so far as religion is a political institution, seeking to coerce the mind and the conscience, one would think they had never heard of it. They feel it is as much every one's right to choose and cherish a religion as to choose and cherish a wife, without having his choice rudely commented upon in public. Hitherto America has been the land of universal goodwill, confidence in life, inexperience of poisons. Until yesterday it believed itself immune from the hereditary plagues of mankind. It could not credit the danger of being suffocated or infected by any sinister principle. The more errors and passions were thrown into the melting-pot, the more certainly would they neutralize one another and would truth come to the top. Every system was met with a frank gaze. 'Come on,' people seemed to say to it, 'show us what you are good for. We accept no claims; we ask for no credentials; we just give you a chance. Plato, the Pope, and Mrs. Eddy shall have one vote each.' After all, I am not sure that this toleration without deference is not a cruel test for systematic delusions: it lets the daylight into the stage.

Philosophic tradition in America has merged almost completely in

German idealism. In a certain sense this system did not need to be adopted: something very like it had grown up spontaneously in New England in the form of transcendentalism and Unitarian theology. Even the most emancipated and positivistic of the latest thinkers—pragmatists, new realists, pure empiricists—have been bred in the atmosphere of German idealism; and this fact should not be forgotten in approaching their views. The element of this philosophy which has sunk deepest, and which is reinforced by the influence of psychology, is the critical attitude towards knowledge, subjectivism, withdrawal into experience, on the assumption that experience is something substantial. Experience was regarded by earlier empiricists as a method for making real discoveries, a safer witness than reasoning to what might exist in nature; but now experience is taken to be in itself the only real existence, the ultimate object that all thought and theory must regard. This empiricism does not look to the building up of science, but rather to a more thorough criticism and disintegration of conventional beliefs, those of empirical science included. It is in the intrepid prosecution of this criticism and disintegration that American philosophy has won its wings.

It may seem a strange Nemesis that a critical philosophy, which on principle reduces everything to the consciousness of it, should end by reducing consciousness itself to other things; yet the path of this boomerang is not hard to trace. The word consciousness originally meant what Descartes called thought or cogitation—the faculty which attention has of viewing together objects which may belong together neither in their logical essence nor in their natural existence. It colours events with memories and facts with emotions, and adds images to words. This synthetic and transitive function of consciousness is a positive fact about it, to be discovered by study, like any other somewhat recondite fact. You will discover it if you institute a careful comparison and contrast between the way things hang together in thought and the way they hang together in nature. To have discerned the wonderful perspectives both of imagination and of will seems to me the chief service done to philosophy by Kant and his followers. It is the positive, the non-malicious element in their speculation; and in the midst of their psychologism in logic and their egotism about nature and history, consciousness seems to be the one province of being which they have thrown true light upon. But just because this is a positive province of being, an actual existence to be discovered and dogmatically believed in, it is not what a malicious criticism of knowledge can end with. Not the nature of consciousness, but the data of consciousness, are what the critic must fall back upon

in the last resort; and Hume had been in this respect a more penetrating critic than Kant. One cannot, by inspecting consciousness, find consciousness itself as a passive datum, because consciousness is cogitation; one can only take note of the immediate objects of consciousness, in such private perspective as sense or imagination may present.

Philosophy seems to be richer in theories than in words to express them in; and much confusion results from the necessity of using old terms in new meanings. In this way, when consciousness is disregarded, in the proper sense of cogitation, the name of consciousness can be transferred to the stream of objects immediately present to consciousness; so that consciousness comes to signify the evolving field of appearances unrolled before any person.

This equivocation is favoured by the allied ambiguity of an even commoner term, *idea*. It is plausible to say that consciousness is a stream of ideas, because an idea may mean an opinion, a cogitation, a view taken of some object. And it is also plausible to say that ideas are objects of consciousness, because an idea may mean an image, a passive datum. Passive data may be of any sort you like—things, qualities, relations, propositions—but they are never cogitations; and to call *them* consciousness or components of consciousness is false and inexcusable. The ideas that may be so called are not these passive objects, but active thoughts. Indeed, when the psychological critic has made this false step, he is not able to halt: his method will carry him presently from this position to one even more paradoxical.

Is memory knowledge of a past that is itself absent and dead, or is it a present experience? A complete philosophy would doubtless reply that it is both; but psychological criticism can take cognizance of memory only as a mass of present images and presumptions. The experience remembered may indeed be exactly recovered and be present again; but the fact that it was present before cannot possibly be given now; it can only be suggested and believed.

It is evident, therefore, that the historical order in which data flow is not contained bodily in any one of them. This order is conceived; the hypothesis is framed instinctively and instinctively credited, but it is only an hypothesis. And it is often wrong, as is proved by all the constitutional errors of memory and legend. Belief in the order of our personal experiences is accordingly just as dogmatic, daring, and realistic as the parallel belief in a material world. The psychological critic must attribute both beliefs to a mere tendency to feign; and if he is true to his method he must discard the notion that the objects of consciousness are arranged in

psychological sequences, making up separate minds. In other words he must discard the notion of consciousness, not only in the sense of thought or cogitation, but in the sense he himself had given it of a stream of ideas. Actual objects, he will now admit, not without a certain surprise, are not ideas at all: they do not lie in the mind (for there is no mind to be found) but in the medium that observably surrounds them. Things are just what they seem to be, and to say they are consciousness or compose a consciousness is absurd. The so-called appearances, according to a perfected criticism of knowledge, are nothing private or internal; they are merely these portions of external objects which from time to time impress themselves on somebody's organs of sense and are responded to by his nervous system.

Such is the doctrine of the new American realists, in whose devoted persons the logic of idealism has worked itself out and appropriately turned idealism itself into its opposite. Consciousness, they began by saying, is merely a stream of ideas; but then ideas are merely the parts of objects which happen to appear to a given person; but again a person (for all you or he can discover) is nothing but his body and those parts of other objects which appear to him; and finally to appear, in any discoverable sense, cannot be to have a ghostly sort of mental existence, but merely to be reacted upon by an animal body. Thus we come to the conclusion that objects alone exist, and that consciousness is a name for certain segments or groups of these objects.

I think we may conjecture why this startling conclusion, that consciousness does not exist, a conclusion suggested somewhat hurriedly by William James, has found a considerable echo in America, and why the system of Avenarius, which makes in the same direction, has been studied there sympathetically. To deny consciousness is to deny a pre-requisite to the obvious, and to leave the obvious standing alone. That is a relief to an overtaxed and self-impaired generation; it seems a blessed simplification. It gets rid of the undemocratic notion that by being very reflective, circumspect, and subtle you might discover something that most people do not see. They can go on more merrily with their work if they believe that by being so subtle, circumspect, and reflective you would only discover a mare's nest. The elimination of consciousness not only restores the obvious, but proves all parts of the obvious to be equally real. Not only colours, beauties, and passions, but all things formerly suspected of being creatures of thought, such as laws, relations, and abstract qualities, now become

components of the existing object, since there is no longer any mental vehicle by which they might have been created and interposed. The young American is thus reassured: his joy in living and learning is no longer chilled by the contempt which idealism used to cast on nature for being imaginary and on science for being intellectual. All fictions and all abstractions are now declared to be parcels of the objective world; it will suffice to live on, to live forward, in order to see everything as it really is.

If we look now at these matters from a slightly different angle, we shall find psychological criticism transforming the notion of truth much as it has transformed the notion of consciousness. In the first place, there is a similar ambiguity in the term. The truth properly means the sum of all true propositions, what omniscience would assert, the whole ideal system of qualities and relations which the world has exemplified or will exemplify. The truth is all things² seen under the form of eternity. In this sense, a psychological criticism cannot be pertinent to the truth at all, the truth not being anything psychological or human. It is an ideal realm of being properly enough not discussed by psychologists; yet so far as I know it is denied by nobody, not even by Protagoras or the pragmatists. If Protagoras said that whatever appears to any man at any moment is true, he doubtless meant true on that subject, true of that appearance: because for a sensualist objects do not extend beyond what he sees of them, so that each of his perceptions defines its whole object and is infallible. But in that case the truth about the universe is evidently that it is composed of these various sensations, each carrying an opinion impossible for it to abandon or to revise, since to revise the opinion would simply be to bring a fresh object into view. The truth would further be that these sensations and opinions stand to one another in certain definite relations of diversity, succession, duration, *et cætera*, whether any of them happens to assert these relations or not. In the same way, I cannot find that our contemporary pragmatists, in giving their account of what truth is (in a different and quite abstract sense of the word truth), have ever doubted, or so much as noticed, what in all their thinking they evidently assume to be the actual and concrete truth: namely, that there are many states of mind, many labouring opinions more or less useful and good, which actually lead to others, more or less expected and satisfactory. Surely every pragmatist, like every thinking man, always assumes the reality of an actual truth, comprehensive and largely undiscovered, of which he claims to be reporting a portion. What he rather confusingly

calls truth, and wishes to reduce to a pragmatic function, is not this underlying truth, the sum of all true propositions, but merely the abstract quality which all true propositions must have in common, to be called true. By truth he means only correctness. The possibility of correctness in an idea is a great puzzle to him, on account of his idealism, which identifies ideas with their objects; and he asks himself how an idea can ever come to be correct or incorrect, as if it referred to something beyond itself.

The fact is, of course, that an idea can be correct or incorrect only if by the word idea we mean not a datum but an opinion; and the abstract relation of correctness, by virtue of which any opinion is true, is easily stated. An opinion is true if what it is talking about is constituted as the opinion asserts it to be constituted. To test this correctness may be difficult or even impossible in particular cases: in the end we may be reduced to believing on instinct that our fundamental opinions are true; for instance, that we are living through time, and that the past and future are not, as a consistent idealism would assert, mere notions in the present. But what renders such instinctive opinions true, if they are true, is the fact affirmed being as it is affirmed to be. It is not a question of similarity or derivation between a passive datum and a hidden object; it is a question of identity between the fact asserted and the fact existing. If an opinion could not freely leap to its object, no matter how distant or hypothetical, and assert something of that chosen object, an opinion could not be so much as wrong; for it would not be an opinion about anything.

Psychologists, however, are not concerned with what an opinion asserts logically, but only with what it is existentially; they are asking what existential relations surround an idea when it is called true which are absent when it is called false. Their problem is frankly insoluble; for it requires us to discover what makes up the indicative force of an idea which by hypothesis is a passive datum; as if a grammarian should inquire how a noun in the accusative case could be a verb in the indicative mood.

It was not idly that William James dedicated his book on Pragmatism to the memory of John Stuart Mill. The principle of psychological empiricism is to look for the elements employed in thinking and to conclude that thought is nothing but those elements arranged in a certain order. It is true that since the days of Mill analysis has somewhat extended the inventory of these elements, so as to include among simples, besides the data of the five senses, such things as feelings of relation, sensations of movement,

vague ill-focused images, and perhaps even telepathic and instinctive intuitions. But some series or group of these immediate data, kept in their crude immediacy, must according to this method furnish the whole answer to our question: the supposed power of an idea to have an object beyond itself, or to be true of any other fact, must be merely a name for a certain position which the given element occupies in relation to other elements in the routine of experience. Knowledge and truth must be forms of contiguity and succession.

We must not be surprised, under these circumstances, if the problem is shifted, and another somewhat akin to it takes its place, with which the chosen method can really cope. This subterfuge is not voluntary; it is an instinctive effect of fidelity to a point of view which has its special validity, though naturally not applicable in every sphere. We do not observe that politicians abandon their party when it happens to have brought trouble upon the country; their destiny as politicians is precisely to make effective all the consequences, good or evil, which their party policy may involve. So it would be too much to expect a school of philosophers to abandon their method because there are problems it cannot solve; their business is rather to apply their method to everything to which it can possibly be applied; and when they have reached that limit, the very most we can ask, if they are superhumanly modest and wise, is that they should make way gracefully for another school of philosophers.

Now there is a problem, not impossible to confuse with the problem of correctness in ideas, with which psychological criticism can really deal: it is the question of the relation between a sign and the thing signified. Of this relation a genuinely empirical account can be given: both terms are objects of experience, present or eventual, and the passage between them is made in time by an experienced transition. Nor need the signs which lead to a particular object be always the same, or of one sort: an object may be designated and foretold unequivocally by a verbal description, without any direct image, or by images now of one sense and now of another, or by some external relation, such as its place, or by its proper name, if it possesses one; and these designations all convey knowledge of it and may be true signs, if in yielding to their suggestion we are brought eventually to the object meant.

Here, if I am not mistaken, is the genuine application of what the pragmatists call their theory of truth. It concerns merely what links a sign to the thing signified, and renders it a practical substitute for the same. But this empirical analysis of signification

has been entangled with more or less hazardous views about truth, such as that an idea is true so long as it is believed to be true, or that it is true if it is good and useful, or that it is not true until it is verified. This last suggestion shows what strange reversals a wayward personal philosophy may be subject to. Empiricism used to mean reliance on the past; now apparently all empirical truth regards only the future, since truth is said to arise by the verification of some presumption. Presumptions about the past can evidently never be verified; at best they may be corroborated by fresh presumptions about the past, equally dependent for their truth on a verification which in the nature of the case is impossible. At this point the truly courageous empiricist will perhaps say that the real past only means the ideas of the past which we shall form in the future. Consistency is a jewel; and, as in the case of other jewels, we may marvel at the price that some people will pay for it. In any case, we are led to this curious result: that radical empiricism ought to deny that any idea of the past can be true at all.

Such dissolving views, really somewhat like those attributed to Protagoras, do not rest on sober psychological analysis: they express rather a certain impatience and a certain despairing democracy in the field of opinion. Great are the joys of haste and of radicalism, and young philosophers must not be deprived of them. We may the more justly pass over these small scandals of pragmatism in that William James and his American disciples have hardly cared to defend them, but have turned decidedly in the direction of a universal objectivism.

The spirit of these radical views is not at all negative: it is hopeful, revolutionary, inspired entirely by love of certitude and clearness. It is very sympathetic to science, in so far as science is a personal pursuit and a personal experience, rather than a body of doctrine with moral implications. It is very close to nature, as the lover of nature understands the word. If it denies the existence of the cognitive energy and the colouring medium of mind, it does so only in a formal sense; all the colours with which that medium endows the world remain painted upon it; and all the perspectives and ideal objects of thought are woven into the texture of things. Not, I think, intelligibly or in a coherent fashion; for this new realism is still immature, and if it is ever rendered adequate it will doubtless seem much less original. My point is that in its denial of mind it has no bias against things intellectual, and if it refuses to admit ideas or even sensations, it does not blink the sensible or ideal objects which ideas and sensations reveal, but rather tries to find a new and (as it perhaps

thinks) a more honourable place for them; they are not to be thought spiritual radiations from the natural world, but parts of its substance.

This may have the ring of materialism; but the temper and faith of these schools are not materialistic. Systematic materialism is one of the philosophies of old age. It is a conviction that may overtake a few shrewd and speculative cynics, who have long observed their own irrationality and that of the world, and have divined its cause: by such men materialism may be embraced without reserve, in all its rigour and pungency. But the materialism of youth is part of a simple faith in sense and in science; it is not exclusive; it admits the co-operation of any other forces—divine, magical, formal, or vital—if appearances anywhere seem to manifest them. The more we interpret the ambiguities or crudities of American writers in this sense, the less we shall misunderstand them.

It seems, then, that the atmosphere of the new world has already affected philosophy in two ways. In the first place, it has accelerated and rendered fearless the disintegration of conventional categories; a disintegration on which modern philosophy has always been at work, and which has precipitated its successive phases. In the second place, the younger cosmopolitan America has favoured the impartial assemblage and mutual confrontation of all sorts of ideas. It has produced, in intellectual matters, a sort of happy watchfulness and insecurity. Never was the human mind master of so many facts and sure of so few principles. Will this suspense and fluidity of thought crystallize into some great new system? Positive gifts of imagination and moral heroism are requisite to make a great philosopher, gifts which must come from the gods and not from circumstances. But if the genius should arise, this vast collection of suggestions and this radical analysis of presumptions which he will find in America may keep him from going astray. Nietzsche said that the earth has been a mad-house long enough. Without contradicting him we might perhaps soften the expression, and say that philosophy has been long enough an asylum for enthusiasts. It is time for it to become less solemn and more serious. We may be frightened at first to learn on what thin ice we have been skating, in speculation as in government; but we shall not be in a worse plight for knowing it, only wiser to-day and perhaps safer to-morrow.